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A Little Known Phase of Medallic Art. ❁



NE of the most interesting exhibitions that has been held in this country was the display of medallic art in the galleries of the Hispanic and Numismatic societies last season. International and comprehensive in scope, it was distinctly an "event." Never before had the beauty and importance of the medal as an art expression been illustrated here. Such an exhibition would be well worth repeating, if possible, especially as the press almost without exception, failed to realize its dignity and significance. It was admirably installed and the catalogue is a valuable book of reference.

Among the exhibits were a few medals and plaquettes in honor of musicians. Moved by the profound impression made upon me by the display and recalling from my reading that, when Beethoven in 1823 sent a copy of his "Missa Solemnis" to Louis XVIII, the king commissioned Gayrard to execute a gold medal,

THE which was sent to the composer and is now
LOTUS owned by the Society of Friends of Music, in
Vienna, I determined to ascertain, if it were
possible, to what extent the art of the medalist
had been called into play to celebrate the art of
the musician.



A BASIS for the study of musical portraiture, though a slim one, is afforded by Gerber's musical dictionary published in 1792 and in a second edition in 1814. In a list of portraits known to him and printed in this dictionary, he mentions a few medals, hardly more than a dozen. How inadequately this covers the subject will appear from the fact that from various sources, too numerous to mention, I have been able to compile descriptive notes of between nine hundred and a thousand distinctive examples of medallic art struck off in honor of composers, singers and instrumentalists, the earliest medals dating from Italy during the fifteenth century and being the work of Sperandio and Giovanni Boldu.

Two are in honor of a physician of Ferrara, who was also noted as a lute player. Sperandio's

is without date; that by Boldu was struck in 1457. In the same year two other musicians, Maserano and a German, Schlifer, were honored with medals by Boldu, and it is fortunate that they were, since nowhere else is there a scrap of information regarding these men to be found; just as our only knowledge of Eberhard Clemant, musician to the bishop of Eichstätt in the seventeenth century, is derived from the inscription on a fine mezzotint engraving issued in 1674.



Unfortunately this article cannot be extended to the dimensions of a monograph on portrait medallions of musicians, though the subject is well worth it. Here only a few details of interest can be indicated. Thus the first Wagner medal does not appear to have been issued until 1876, when "The Ring of the Nibelung" was produced at Bayreuth. Yet the Wagner medals, some sixty or seventy, outnumber those of any other composer and doubtless will be added to with each recurring festival at Bayreuth. Even the Bayreuth bicycle club issued, in 1882, a Wagner medal to be raced for, with valkyries in the design and the valkyrie cry in the lettering.

WAGNER'S predominance in the medal series might be called in question were account to be taken of the numerous tradesmen's tokens bearing Handel's likeness, issued in England and most of them redeemable in half-pennies. They bear interesting testimony to the popularity of the composer of "The Messiah" in the country that honored him with burial in the Abbey, but they are not medals. They are known as the "Norwich," "Coventry" and "London" tokens and, besides these, there are a few without indication of place of issue. The Coventry series, like a set of modern picture postals, has different views of the city on the obverse of the tokens. One of the London series was a ticket of admission to Vauxhall Gardens. It bears a representation of Roubillac's Handel statue.

Accepting Wagner as the composer to whom the medalist has most frequently done homage, those next in order are Beethoven, Mozart and Verdi. The immense popularity of Verdi in his native land, explains the many medals in his honor. After the three just mentioned come Handel and Haydn. How long Bach was in coming into his own is evidenced

by the fact that there is no Bach medal of earlier date than 1880!

There are instances in which doubtful dates are verified or corrected and missing dates supplied by the inscriptions on medals of the period. "Date of birth and death unknown," says "Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Music and Musicians" of Heinrich Finck, an early and eminent German contrapuntist. But there is in the British Museum a medal issued in 1528, commemorative of Finck's death in that year and stating that he had reached the age of eighty-three. His dates, therefore, are determined by this medal as being 1445-1528.

In round numbers four hundred composers, singers and instrumental virtuosos are represented by the medals on which I have been able to secure descriptive notes. Many of them are the work of distinguished medalists and, from the information I have gathered, must be authentic and admirable examples of portraiture and allegorical design.

